

Excellence in Virtual Education: The *Tutor Online* Approach

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Abstract

It is a fact that the notion of education has been changing over the last years, mainly owing to the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). In this globalized world, we are swamped by information, and the key issue is to surf it and choose the appropriate bit. This wealth of information and the need of being constantly updating knowledge in order to carry out our work in the way we are demanded by society, turn learning into lifelong self-training. This paper aims to present the experience of collaborative work in a virtual learning scenario held by the *University of Salamanca*, *Clay Formación Internacional* and *Asociación Logo*, in the Continuing Education and Specialist Course ***Technologies and Networked Training Methodologies: Tutor Online***. Being former students, now we belong to the tutor and scientific team. The ***Tutor Online*** project (TOL) is an instance of how to widespread quality continuing education and smooth away the access to it. Its asynchronous nature allows each individual to adapt it to their own particular time and space needs.

Keywords

Online Teaching, eLearning, Internet-Based Instruction, Networked Learning, Collaborative Learning, Competency-Based Education, Student-Centered Learning

1. Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are having an increasing influence on the working, occupational and business worlds, as they create and generate new occupations and professions, and strengthen other ways of dealing with continuing education.

The development and introduction of ICTs in distance learning systems has been bringing about changes in the teaching-learning processes for years, and therefore, changes in the profile of students and teachers, who see a series of alternatives to classroom attendance in these methods, and which allow them to gain access to continuing education (The European Union *New Generation of Programmes* consists of a series of planned interventions for the Sectorial Programmes -Comenius, Leonardo da Vinci and Grundtvig- aimed at continuing education (http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/newprog/index_es.html), with a total budget of 13,270 million euros).

The interest and appreciation regarding these initiatives stem from personal and social needs. Adaptability, flexibility, cooperation, overcoming barriers, etc., are all concepts related to this type of learning. However, there is a risk that multiple sectors (politics, business, learning institutions, professionals and users) will come up with theoretical concepts of no practical application whatsoever. That is why debating and searching for realistic and efficient solutions is still a priority so that it does not all end up being a mere declaration of intent. This type of training is acquiring considerable presence in sectors such as occupational and business training, but according to the latest *Estudio General de Internet* (<http://www.egi.es>), only 56.5 % of the Spanish Internet users who received online training said they were satisfied with it.

The Continuing Education and Specialist course, *Technologies and Networked Training Methodologies: Tutor Online* (TOL) (<http://www.tutoron-line.info>), aims to overcome the inconvenience created by the lack of interaction between teachers and students and which affected first-generation Distance Education. It is assumed that we are all protagonists (students, tutors, authors, etc.) in an online training space and we can all contribute to the construction of knowledge by sharing our personal and professional experience and playing different roles (student-tutors, expert-beginners, and so on).

In doing so, we have the possibility of becoming active participants in a teaching and learning community in a virtual environment, taking advantage of the possibilities it presents, pointing them out and identifying and collecting ways of improving the course after each edition, in a constant pursuit of quality. This initiative, which started in September 2004, has already gone through four editions (TOL I – TOL IV), and is a constantly evolving experience which intends to continue developing itself during following editions. We can trace its evolution throughout its history.

2. Objectives

The main objective of the *TOL* course is to provide participants with a high-level professional course regarding networked training, whether for academia, business, or the working world.

Quality training for a new kind of professional is offered: the Tutor Online, key to the development of all high-level *eLearning*, whose function and profile had not been clearly defined up to now. Specifically, this objective can be summed up with the following specific targets:

- To develop the abilities, techniques, strategies and potentialities required for the training of a professional Tutor Online.
- To dominate the main psychological, communicative and methodological abilities used in eLearning.
- To know the quality indicators in online training experiences.
- To learn about and efficiently use the specifications, standards and technological elements which come into play in the eLearning processes, especially platforms, as well as collaborative and authoring tools.
- To design and monitor high-level eLearning projects.
- To evaluate the teaching and learning processes in eLearning initiatives.

3. The *Tutor Online* initiative

A tutor online can be defined as “*the teacher and professional figure who accompanies a group of students during a part of their training; guaranteeing the efficiency of all aspects of the teaching-learning process; working towards achieving goals; acquiring content, competences and skills, which will be needed during the training interventions he is responsible for, in a context of collaborative and active learning; and evaluating the level of achievement of these objectives, on the part of the students as well as by the training initiative itself (quality management)*” (Seoane, 2005).

The key to the initiative is to learn by doing. This will only be accomplished if it is supported by a neutral, trustworthy and efficient environment: as well as quality content, there is a bunch of people (tutors, authors, scientific team) who manage the learning process to an even greater extent than in a classroom based initiative.

By means of an educational plan, the student acquires all the skills necessary for him to manage his own online activities, in an area where he was previously competent.

The main competences, skills and methods that this professional must learn during his training, in order to be passed on in turn to the students during his professional activities in a specific field are:

- Disciplinary competences in a given field.
- Technological competences and skills.
- Psychopedagogic competences and skills.
- Communicative competences and skills.
- Basic knowledge management competences and skills.
- Basic competences and skills in the design of training projects.
- Basic competences and skills in the design of educational contents.
- Competences in the evaluation of teaching and learning processes.
- Basic competences in the evaluation of training interventions.
- Basic quality management competences.
- Methodological skills for teamwork.
- Use of a methodology of collaborative work.

4. Methodology

In the Tutor Online course, a constructivist methodology is put into play. Constructivism in education, strengthened by the use of ICTs, justifies that for learning to take place, it is necessary for the learner to participate actively, which shows interest and motivation, with a display of both analytical and reflexive skills. This way, the students become the protagonists of their own learning process (Jonassen, 1999).

Our methodology also implies a collaborative learning approach, which allows us to talk about actual significant learning in an environment of high-quality continuing education. Such an atmosphere makes it easier for the students to become involved in

the common project by sharing their own previous experience, knowledge and assets in order to achieve common as well as individual objectives.

The following are the essential aspects of the *TOL* course:

- It allows students to work according to their rhythm and personal learning style. Flexibility is one the most appreciated aspects of this type is learning, as it allows for a balance to be struck between family and professional life, and continuing education.
- Closeness to the student. The creation of informal forums where students and teachers can interact in a relaxed environment is very important and creates personal involvement. It allows for the creation of a relational, affective and emotional setting based on trust, security and mutual adaptation.
- Communication by means of asynchronous tools, forums basically, allows users to connect to the platform regardless of spatial and time barriers, and it favours:
 - The student's personal organization.
 - The necessary reflection to communicate what he wants with his own contributions.
 - Communication with fellow students and tutors.
 - The contribution with interesting materials and links to the common space.
 - The retrieval of information and past conversations in each of the open forums, as a library of educational content.
- Communication by means of synchronous tools (basically instant messaging, chats and videoconferencing) allows for real-time communication, which can

work in favour of finding the solution to specific and immediate doubts between participants, be they students or tutors.

- When working in groups is required, these will never exceed fifteen people, occasionally breaking down into subgroups of five or six people. This way of grouping creates interdependence between members. So, each of them is responsible not only for his learning, but also for his partners'; and it requires them to develop communicative and negotiation skills along with the rest of the group members.
- The groups of students created in the *TOL* course are interdisciplinary as the people who sign up have different academic and/or professional backgrounds. This fact is considered an added value of this type to learning, since students interpret the materials at their disposal according to their own previous experience and knowledge. They start sharing it with the rest of their colleagues in different forums and according to different methodological strategies. This sharing can lead to a restructuring and recreation of the schemes already set in place, and that is when we can talk about the significant learning which is desirable during training.
- The basis to acquire the competences, skills and knowledge necessary to carry out tasks is a balance between theoretical contents and practical activities which simulate real situations.
- In order to look after the participants' specific needs and personal interests, contents and activities are diversified and adapted under the careful supervision of a team of teachers who guarantee the pertinence of this educational itinerary. Personalized and adapted monitoring takes place.

- The teamwork which is necessary among the teaching staff is carried over to the students, since during the different modules which make up the course they need to fulfil different roles (tutors, librarians, etc.). Collaborative group work comes into play once again: individuals become involved in the final collective result.
- The teaching team coordinates each and every one of its interventions so that each unit is seen to belong to a coherent evolutionary line of learning management.
- Answering to the fact that “*a great part of the evaluation initiatives which are being implemented have gone beyond mere scoring and seek strategies capable of contemplating the action of educating as a whole, where it is impossible to evaluate without taking the interrelations between the different elements of the training process into account*” (Zangrando, 2004), the following evaluations take place:
 - ***Initial evaluation*** (diagnostic function), whose purpose is to evaluate each participant’s determining factors when it comes to training, at the following levels:
 - Motivation and expectations for participation in the activity.
 - Previous knowledge and skills.
 - Knowledge and availability of the technical equipment necessary to achieve the activity’s optimum results.
 - ***Continuing evaluation*** (resulting function). The objectives must be established during each learning unit or module.
 - It favours personalized monitoring, adapted to each participant.
 - It allows the diversification of learning itineraries.

- **Final evaluation:** (integrative function). It must include all the training components: objectives, platforms, methodology, material and professionals.

Knowledge is built through experience, therefore the participants' significant learning will shine through when they are capable of re-elaborating their knowledge and are able to build and develop a practical and contextualized application of all they have learned during the training period.

5. Educational programme model

The educational programme has been progressively modified, from the benefit of the experience we have acquired, in order to completely train the student in all aspects that must be dominated by a Tutor Online, from the pedagogical to the technological ones. Contents are divided into modules, themselves divided into units. Each module is directed by a team of two tutors working together.

Preparation of the final project is not a module per se. Each tutor takes care of directing several projects, by working with each student in order to define the theme, and then to coherently build each of its parts, before finally implementing them on one of the studied platforms or tools.

As an example, *Table 1* offers the TOL IV educational programme.

<i>Module</i>	<i>Title</i>
Module A General introduction to eLearning and contexts where it can be applied.	Unit 1: Introduction to eLearning and to the online tutor's role. Contexts where eLearning can be applied. Unit 2: The importance of communication and the tutor's professional task. Competences and skills. Community of Learning and Community of Practice: the collaborative methodology in eLearning and knowledge management.
Module B Standards and Learning Objects.	Unit 3: Introduction to eLearning standards and specifications. Unit 4: Learning Objects.

Module C The environment for the tutor's work: technology.	Unit 5: eLearning platforms. Unit 6: eLearning tools.
Module D Management and design of eLearning activities.	Unit 6: Learning management, evaluation of interactions and activities. Unit 7: Design of eLearning initiatives.
Preparation of the Final Project .	Each student is individually helped by one of the tutors in order to prepare his Final Project.
Attended workshop . (as an option it can be attended by videoconference).	Individual and public presentations of an abstract covering the final project as well as the whole course experience.

Table 1: Course structure.

6. Some data about the *TOL* edition history

In *Table 2*, we sum up the number of participants in the different editions of *TOL*, as well as the number of people who dropped out and their home country.

Editions	Participants	Drop outs	Connected countries
1st edition: TOL I September - December 2004	25	2	Argentina, Brazil, Germany, Mexico, Spain.
2nd edition: TOL II March – June 2005	13	1	Argentina, Brazil, Italy, Mexico, Spain.
3rd edition: TOL III January - April 2006	26	3*	Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Spain.
4th edition: TOL IV May – July 2006	16	1	Brazil, México, Panama, Spain.

Table 2. *TOL* editions. (*None of them actually started the course).

The following are some of the most appreciated *TOL* features by the participants of the different editions:

- The use of an important amount of business elements in learning management, so that the student perceives a strong relation between the academic training he is receiving and the needs of the labour market he will have to join.

- The structuring of work into small groups, formed after the first week, once the students are introduced to and become familiar with the initial platform.
- Synchronous and asynchronous communication is based on forums, and in a lesser way, on instant messaging within the different platforms. Chat and email use outside the platforms is reduced as much as possible. The forum is the *TOL* project *soul* and most important space. It is the key spot, where all those involved in the initiative come together, and where the real process of significant and collaborative learning takes place. The participants deal with and generate a great amount of information and updated contents, and they are also responsible for the construction of new knowledge. The potential of this asynchronous tool is maximized as much as possible, and the result is a valuable experience, in the securing of the final objectives as much as in the process itself. This can be seen in the following fragment of a message sent by one the participants in the third edition of the course, four weeks after it started:

[...] This morning it occurred to me that in this course we learn a lot “while” we do things, whereas up till now I had studied the theory first, and when I knew it well I started with the practical applications. We will have to get used to this new method. In any case, we must not forget what the tutor tells us, that the final result is not as important as what we learn by trying to reach it. I.S. [...]
(Forum El Mus, 2/2/2006)

- The average is about three significant messages (a significant message is a forum post of great value, and it is part of the teaching-learning process) per student per day. In some courses there have been up to 120 – 150 significant

messages (20 – 30 messages for a two-week module). There are about three times more significant interventions by the tutors than by the students.

- The answering time to any consultation made by a participant is guaranteed to be less than 24 hours, the average being five to eight hours.
- The total drop-out rate has been 8.8 % for the 80 participants in the four editions of the course.
- Individual and group activities are of very high quality, and the final projects presented by the participants, supervised by a designated tutor, are real online teaching projects, some of which are already being put into place in businesses and institutions.
- The average passing grade is higher than 7.5 out of 10.
- The number of students who do not obtain the final certificate is very low, as the course content is adapted for students with difficulties, and the modules which have not been passed can be studied once again free of charge.

7. Modifications implemented in *TOL III* (January – April 2006)

Another aspect of the *Tutor Online Course* is the possibility of carrying out the necessary modifications to guarantee a quality continuing and specialized training.

Considering the constant evolution seen in ICTs and the continuous generation of literature about the different contents included in the programme, permanent change and evolution are a must. The specific evaluation of each edition brings forth the collection and analysis of relevant records which allows us to introduce the necessary modifications and updates. It is thus used as tool for continuous improvement. To that extent, the *TOL* course carries out periodic supervisions to detect elements which are liable to being modified and updated.

Therefore, from the third edition onwards, a series of restructurings have taken place, which cover design, methodology, contents, material and evaluation.

Regarding its international projection:

- The Diploma provided has been adapted to the ESHE (European Space for Higher Education).
- It has become one of the first courses to be certified under the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System). This certifies the contents in English and homologates it with the directives being used in the Space for Higher Education. It thus meets the European Union objective (2007 – 2013) of focusing on the qualification and homologation of Continuing and Vocational Training.
- Since then, the certification has come with a Diploma Supplement, an experimental and pioneering advance in Continuing Education at the European level, in accordance with the instructions of the Europass Diploma Supplement (the Europass was created by Decision 2241/2004/CE of the European Parliament and the Council meeting of December 15th, 2004, relative to a single common framework for transparency in qualifications and competences. <http://europass.cedefop.eu.int/>).

Regarding the general initiative:

- It is included in a broader investigation project which will be a part of other initiatives. A research group is being created, the research GRoup in InterAction and eLearning (GRIAL - <http://grial.usal.es>), attached to the University of Salamanca, for continuing and postgraduate education.
- Institutional links with the business world have been created: half of the participants in the latest editions have come from the business sector.

Regarding the content:

- The education is no longer based on *modules*, but on *units*. A module has become a block of content, and thus exportable and reusable.
- The training begins with the *Introduction to eLearning* module, and the *Standards and Learning Objects (LOs)* one. This change is due to the nature of an LO: the minimum significant unit in eLearning. The rules of the game must be known in order to understand that *Learning Objects* are not the end point of the training, but the beginning.

Regarding the material:

- Its presentation has been restructured. It has been updated and made more varied.
- Student projects are considered as potential future educational materials.
- The didactic units have been developed by the tutors.

Regarding the students:

- Curricular adaptations are introduced, aiming at each student's needs and interests.
- The educational itineraries are made more diverse.
- By means of collaboration agreements with entities and organizations, all the course participants automatically gained access to the labour and business internship exchange.

Regarding the tutors:

- Their work is coordinated between small teams which managed the teaching-learning process in the assigned modules.
- They can elaborate content, thus becoming authors of the materials.

- Three types of tutors were established: academic, psychopedagogic and personal, their roles are as follows (Seoane, García, Bosom, Fernández & Hernández, 2006):
 - The *academic tutor*: he elaborates the didactic unit to his module and organizes the student's activities, as well as guiding, helping motivating and accompanying him. This figure comes into an environment of autonomous learning, demands more of the student and turns the teacher into someone who answers questions, helps with academic problems, asks questions which the student must answer, and sets a personal learning rhythm in accordance with his initial level and the final level which the student wants to achieve. A crucial role of the Tutor Online is evaluating the students' participation, as well as their work and learning process. All this to favour a learning process which is autonomous and active, collaborative, involved with the rest of the group, but also close, individualized and personal.
 - The *psychopedagogic tutor*: his work consists of adapting the task of acquiring competences, skills and content in a given subject to the students' different learning styles. Some students require heuristic learning, whereas others prefer to learn by rote before they manage a problem-solving process, and different problems need to be explained with different didactic strategies. The psychopedagogic tutor needs to adapt the learning process to the available content and strategies, and adapt them to each student's learning style. Thus, if it is a different person than the academic tutor, he can provide advice to the teacher (in a general way or regarding specific requirements), to the student (*idem*) or

provide guidance and intervene in cases where there is a learning difficulty concerning a specific subject in a particular group.

- The *personal tutor*: he provides council, support and guidance during the learning process by using what he learns about the students, and by studying how certain contents will be adequate for a student's academic background, interests and vocation. It is a context which is greatly linked to American Humanistic Psychology, which is why the Tutor Online, in this sense is typical of the Anglo-Saxon University systems, especially of the more elitist systems. It is mentoring, counselling, monitoring of an individual student, so that he can reach the general goals foreseen in the learning process. Here the tutor is a counsellor, a guide, a source of security which the student sometimes seeks, and which can be a cause of failure, precisely when he does not have someone to approve (or ratify) the decisions he takes. This indecision may sometimes be more harmful than a bad decision.

8. Modifications implemented in *TOL IV* (May – July 2006)

TOL IV has been fairly similar to TOL III, which is where numerous changes took place. Although we would like to point out some of the modifications that have been implemented.

Regarding its international projection:

- In TOL IV, the Diploma Supplement has been modified and extended, in order to ensure a better adaptation to the European format with reference to the competences acquired by the student after the training process.

Regarding the general initiative:

- The *TOL* pedagogic team is now part of the GRIAL research group. This presentation is one of his research initiatives.

Regarding the content:

- Each module pedagogic guide includes a table of competences and skills which the student must acquire before moving onwards.
- A *Student's Guide* has been prepared and is handed out during the first module and provides all the necessary information about the course, as well as about the rules which must be followed in order to get the most out the educational forums.
- Cross-curricular technological knowledge has been included, which is taught throughout the course, without being included in any of the modules.
- A final module has been included in order to elaborate the final mandatory design and implementation project of an online course. This module partly overlaps with module D (*Management and design of eLearning activities*), as the students need to start the projects in time. Each student is assigned a tutor for his project, and all academic tutors participate in this module, with an average of three students each.

Regarding the material:

- Some of the materials used in the course, including multimedia, were elaborated by the TOL III students. This provides continuity for the training project throughout the different editions and turns the previous students into material creators.

Regarding the evaluation:

- The student's evaluative role has been increased; they now provide an appreciation of their own work, as well as the tutor's, and about the whole

TOL educational process. They evaluate each unit after finishing it, taking into account the content as well as the tutor's role. This type of evaluation had already been carried out in the previous editions, but it was only done at the end of the course. A self-evaluation by the students has also been included at the end of each unit, where each student is encouraged to reflect on his work, the acquired knowledge and his own learning process. We expect to gain information about the student, which will allow us to improve the process during the course itself, by studying each student's learning style and therefore, this will let us make the appropriate changes. It is also expected to be useful as a tool for the continuing improvement of the *TOL*, as these students' evaluations provide very useful information for the pedagogic team.

- The evaluation of the students, carried out by the pedagogic tutors, has been perfected: it now includes more items, which allow us to grade the student's participation with greater precision.

Regarding the students:

- Four *TOL* III students, who had not passed some of the modules, and therefore had not got the Diploma, were allowed to repeat them during *TOL* IV. This experience ended up as not particularly positive, as the students had problems unrelated to the course in *TOL* III, and they arose again in *TOL* IV. This resulted in their failure to pass some of the modules again this time, and they were also distorting elements for the rest of the group. For new editions this should be reconsidered, maybe by providing them with special contents or offering them the possibility to repeat the whole course, but by

no means integrate them into a pre-existing group of students that is already forming the necessary interrelations for collaborative work.

9. Modifications to be implemented in future editions

Following the analysis of the last edition of **TOL** (May – July 2006), the following modifications are being considered.

Regarding the course itself:

- Creating tailor-made **TOL** courses for businesses or academic institutions.

The organizations involved in eLearning need to train their own tutors if they want to provide quality education. However, these tutors, who already have a certain profile, need to acquire some particular skills, but not all those included in the **Technologies and Networked Training Methodologies: Tutor Online** course, either because they already have them or because they are not necessary in their line of work. That is why we are contemplating the creation of made-to-measure courses where we can adapt contents to the needs of a specific group of students.

- Besides this continuing education initiative, the **TOL** pedagogic team and the GRIAL research group will take part in an eLearning study programme, which will be one of the University of Salamanca's own degrees, and which will be called *eLearning: Networked Technologies and Teaching Methods*, starting in 2007. This programme will try to satisfy the increasing demand for continuing education in eLearning for graduates, and will present a double itinerary, the *University Expert* (http://www3.usal.es/~webtcicl/web-tp06web/titulos_06/38_experto_elearning.doc), covering 30 ECTS credits, and the *University Master* (http://www3.usal.es/~webtcicl/web-tp06web/titulos_06/38_experto_elearning.doc), covering 60 ECTS credits.

tp/tp06web/titulos_06/37_master_elearning.doc), covering 60 ECTS credits. This creates a progressive Postgraduate Diploma, since once the necessary credits for the first academic year (30 ECTS) have been acquired, participants will have a *University Expert in eLearning* Postgraduate Diploma. After the second year and another 30 ECTS credits (60 ECTS in all), they will obtain the *University Master in eLearning* Diploma. This new initiative will make us modify the **Technologies and Networked Training Methodologies: Tutor Online** course, since its contents cannot overlap those being taught in the above Postgraduate programme.

Regarding the content:

- The students must base the mandatory final design and application project of an online course on the knowledge they have acquired during the course. It has always been this way, but perhaps we have not managed to make it clear enough. In TOL IV we realized that several students had been using more or less original eLearning activities for their final project which were already working or being prepared in their respective companies. We believe that the point of creating a project is to display the knowledge, skills and competences mastered during the **TOL** course, and therefore it must derive from the course itself, developing the student's own idea.

Regarding the students:

- The psychopedagogic tutor, in collaboration with the academic tutor, must create a special adaptation of the contents so as to allow the students who have not passed the course to pass the failed modules. Following the TOL IV experience (the only edition with students repeating modules) they should

not be integrated into future editions, unless they are willing to repeat the whole course.

Regarding the tutors:

- The psychopedagogic tutor's task is mainly aimed at the academic tutors, striving to achieve uniformity between the different didactic units and providing them with information about the students as an outsider viewer of the learning process. The experience we had during the third edition, when this independent academic tutor was first used, is that students prefer to solve their learning problems with him, and therefore that the psychopedagogic tutor must support the academic tutor, rather than helping the student directly. After the fourth edition, we consider that one of the psychopedagogic tutor's functions must be to collect information about the students: professional profiles, evaluations and self-evaluations, satisfaction surveys. All this data is a relevant source for investigation and analysis in order to improve *TOL*.

10. Conclusions

The knowledge construction process which takes place during the *TOL* course makes for a unique educational experience each time, with different results, and this reality enriches greatly the project's learning process.

Forums appear to be the main interaction tools in the development of collaborative work, and without them, the learning itinerary as it currently exists, could not take place. The activities projected are varied and contextualized. Content is presented in different formats, and the organization in units in the different modules and its later adaptation are a sign of flexibility and customization. The evaluation of the participant

is part of a more complex process which is revealed at the beginning of each module. Finally, the fact that all the related agents involved (designers, coordinators, tutors, and above all, students) is essential for the significant learning to take place.

All of which leads to conclude that the course held by the University of Salamanca, *Technologies and Networked Training Methodologies: Tutor Online*, is part of an ambitious continuing education project which is constantly being improved and transformed, and which is a source for other new initiatives. The high standard of satisfaction among students, its practical applications in business and academic, and the research which is being carried out based on this initiative, all allow us to support quality as an engine for growth in eLearning training in the 21st century.

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